

An Unsolicited Proposal Regarding Tourism Oriented Developments for the Future of Dawson

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This proposal was unsolicited and done solely by the writer in an effort to stimulate the creation of new and exciting tourism attractions to assist in the economic development in the Dawson area. The proposed developments have been envisioned as a means of increasing tourism in the Dawson area by creating some new themes and activities that are at this point absent. The new themes and activities are not intended to replace the Gold Rush theme, that has worked so well for so long, but to add something new and complementary. The proposal is meant to begin a process that would involve open dialogue and discussion/involvement of all parties mentioned in the document.

Background

The Klondike Gold Rush began in 1896, approximately one hundred and ten years ago. Fifty years prior, the California Gold Rush took place and in parallel to Dawson, the city of Placerville was created, at the heart of it all.

About thirty years ago people in Placerville's tourism industry noticed interest in their gold rush history was waning; it was after all over one hundred and twenty five years since it took place, or about seven generations. As fewer and fewer people came to see the history of the California Gold Rush, the tourism industry began to flag and Placerville saw it's livelihood and economy disappearing.

Their solution to the problem was to reinvent themselves and now, thirty years later, tourists go to Placerville for it's many surrounding vineyards and quality artists and once there, have their experience enriched when they learn about Placerville's colorful gold rush history.

Dawson is beginning to see the same waning of interest in its gold rush history and there is an urgent need to reinvent ourselves and create new reasons for people to be drawn here. The new "themes" or attractions should not be seen as competitive to the existing themes and attractions but complementary and as such should be designed to be entwined.

There are four main themes that make up the feel and nature of Dawson; wilderness, the North, our First Nations culture and the Klondike Gold Rush. The following proposal involves them all.

First Nation's Culture and History as an Economic Engine

There is a growing interest in First Nation's culture around the world. More and more, people are traveling to see and learn about other people and our First Nation's story would certainly be of interest to many and could easily become the nucleus for a new and exciting economic engine. Creating economy around our First Nation's culture has already begun and a recent example is the Great River Journey river trip.

The Vision

The vision for creating a new economic engine around First Nations culture and history is to tell their story and to tell it from the beginning to present, in an assortment of ways, venues and formats.

Following are three projects that vary in the degree of First Nation's culture they have. By presenting these three projects I in no way am indicating they are the only three, for there are many more, possibly larger but probably smaller, that need to be identified and pursued.

As time, working relationships and ability allows, I would like to think that Dawsonites, as a whole, represented by the various key organizations, will rise to the challenge and in a step wise fashion work towards building a new economy for our region, an economy that is sustainable, long lasting and of such a quality that it attracts money and visitors on an international scale.

Project; Beringia, “Peopling the Americas”

Location; Tr’ochek area (Lousetown)

Partners; Tr’ondek Hwech’in, various departments of Yukon and possibly Parks Canada

The Vision

The vision is to build a world class interpretation center that tells the story of the peopling of the Americas. That the “Peopling of the America’s” interpretive center become “the” interpretive center in the Americas for telling that story.

Note:

Although I strongly believe the theme for this should be “peopling of the Americas” I will use the generalized word “Beringia” as it can capture everything and is currently the name used for the exhibit in Whitehorse. In essence what I am suggesting is that the exhibit in Whitehorse eventually be closed down and a new, grander and all encompassing interpretive center be established in Dawson. First Nations Great River Journeys trip theoretically reaches farther and farther back in time the closer it gets to Dawson, so having Beringia as the final destination is perfect since it is the beginning of their story in the Americas.

Reestablish the Beringia theme in Dawson. Beringia is where the First Peoples story begins, Dawson is in Beringia and is traditional First Nation’s territory, so the fit is excellent. Originally I had envisioned this development to take place in Tr’ochek, but for a number reasons it may make sense to locate most of this development on the upper bench above Tr’ochek. The upper bench has been heavily mined and as such, constructing from a bedrock base is easily achievable. The higher site also commands a better view and the entire area lends itself well to other additional developments.

Because of the spiritual nature of Tr’ochek, it might be more suitable to use this area strictly for showcasing TH paleo cultural heritage. This would create a situation where tourists could walk across a foot bridge to Tr’ochek, learn about TH heritage then either walk or be bussed up the hill to the Beringia site. The bus service could be further developed into tours out and around the Klondike and its tributarie, once existing access roads out of Tr’ochek along the Klondike are upgraded.

The Beringia/peopling of the Americas stories are inseparable and as such should be interwoven, told together and housed under one roof. Telling the two stories in concert would provide a boundless wealth of material from which to work and if done well, could create a world class attraction. The history and culture of all the America’s First Peoples should be covered, but particular emphasis and detail should be placed on Yukon’s First Peoples.

Architecturally, the structure for this should be depictive of Beringia era First People’s skin hut and be of such a size that the Peopling of the Americas story can be told in as many formats as possible i.e. big screen video, open displays, hands on learning, live performance etc.

The area outside the “hut” should be developed to tell the story in a more interactive way and should provide for Yukon’s First Nations to showcase their history & culture. There should be reconstructed permanent and temporary settlements, living displays of how they lived, caught fish, hunted, made tools etc. There should also be summer short courses on their language, beading and sewing etc, which could attract tourists to stay for a few days to a few weeks.

The historic bridge that used to go from Dawson to Lousetown should be rebuilt as a walking bridge to allow an easy flow of people to and from and to deliver electricity and water. The bridge should be reminiscent of the original.

Parks Canada or Yukon should be encouraged to develop and interpret parts of the historic Lousetown Gold Rush history.

The Archeological Department of Yukon partnered with TH should interpret Tr'ochek.

The Archeological Department of Yukon should incorporate and interpret the archeological history of Yukon in an additional structure designed specifically for that purpose and located on the upper bench.

The Archeological Department of Yukon should be relocated to Dawson.

Project; The Tr'ondek Hwech'in Story Performed

Partners; Parks Canada/Tr'ondek Hwech'in/KVA/Cirque de Soleil/Yukon/Canada

Background

With flagging interest in the Klondike Gold Rush history, it is becoming harder and harder to fill the Palace Grand Theater using that story. Over the past ten or so years it has become increasingly difficult to make the Theater economical. It's time for a new show.

The Vision

A world class show be mounted in the Palace Grand Theater that depicts the Tr'ondek Hwech'in story, beginning with their creation story, to their arrival in the Americas via Beringia, their pre-European history, Europeans contact and the Klondike Gold Rush to present. The Palace show should be the nucleus for an expandable show that can be presented in small or large venues with larger shows showing/ touring around the world.

This is a “go big or go home” kind of initiative. As a money making venture, a small play house in Dawson City will at very best always be fiscally challenged and although it could create some wealth for Yukon by attracting visitors, would probably not be capable of creating great revenue for itself. But, if our vision is that the show in the Palace is a nucleus and a “proof of concept” for an expandable show with a grander show touring or showing around the world then we may have a potential money maker.

If, in the very beginning, we design the show in such a way that it can be scaled up or down according to the size of venue and we think of it as a promotional piece for Yukon, then its return on investment could be much greater. I could see a grand, expanded version of this on tour or as long running shows playing in key cities around the world such as London, New York, Paris, Las Vegas etc. At the same time I could see small scaled down versions on cruise ships along the BC & Alaskan coast during the summer seasons and the “original” “Tr'ondek Hwech'in” story in the Palace Grand Theater, attracting tourist to our town from afar and filling the seats night after night.

But, the success of a show is determined by the number of seats filled and as such the quality, caliber and professionalism of the show needs to be world class. In order for this endeavor to succeed, the show has to be able to fill the houses time and time again and cannot be done in half measure.

Cirque de Soleil has successfully mounted exactly the type of First Nations history show, described above, in Lahaina, Hawaii and it is spellbinding. They have also mounted shows in small venues such as cruise ships and are known world wide as creating the best shows on earth. Cirque is obviously capable of doing what we want and have the requisites, so a “no holds barred”, “no stone left unturned”, “never say die” effort should be made to convince Cirque to take this project on.

Having “Cirque de Soleil” on Yukon promotional materials would be an amazing coup that would, by itself, put Yukon on the world map (if it weren't already) and attract people from far and wide. Achieving this seemingly unrealistic goal would be well worth the effort and as such should not be scaled down by those with no vision or ability to see the possible.

Additional notes on Tr'ondek Hwech'in/Palace Grand:

As well as the TH/ Cirque de Soleil show, performing arts should be taught in the Palace Grand Theater during the winter months, with the instructors, students and perhaps some professionals eventually performing in the summer presentations at the Palace and Diamond Tooth Gerties. This would breathe life into the Palace and a new economy into Dawson, it would raise the caliber of the shows presented while providing education and year around work to many. This may be a partnership that could also involve the Dawson City Arts Society as they already have done some work on this concept.

Additional notes on First Nation's Culture and History as an Economic Engine

The Great River Journeys trip, the Beringia/TH initiative and the TH/Cirque show are all based on First Nations culture and history and are so entwined they will create a rich and enthralling tourism package. This is a package you can take to the bank. In this case, I think the bank is the Federal Government and as such a strategy needs to be developed in order to get complete "buy in" at that level. If we are able to secure Federal support, then getting the necessary financing for the projects should not be difficult and we should also be able to use them to "strong arm" Cirque.

The North, the Wilderness and forgotten Gold Rush History as Attractions

Background

In the seventies, Yukon determined there was a need for tourism infrastructure and marketing for Yukon and particularly Dawson. They saw the rich Klondike Gold Rush History as a nucleus around which a tourism economy could be created and as such they expended some serious money to assist in the creation of the needed infrastructure such as hotel rooms etc. Parks Canada was spending heavily on the historic structures in and around Dawson and a Gold Rush based tourism economy took off.

More and more our visitor's interests are changing. Interest in our Gold Rush history is waning and is being replaced by interest in First Nations culture and the wilderness. Although there is a general realization that changes have to take place, there is no cold hard cash in Dawson to make it happen. With far more infrastructure than can be supported by a three month tourist season, private sector in Dawson is pressed.

We have reached one of those places in time where Government has to do its part and "step up to the plate" and again assist new initiatives to succeed and so create new nuclei around which economy can develop. A prime example of how this can successfully work is expressed in the belief and support Government has shown for the Dawson City Art Society's (DCAS) art economy initiatives. In less than ten years, DCAS, with the support of Yukon (and numerous other organizations, companies and individuals) has created a new economy around the arts, including an accredited school of art, all of which will continue to grow, adding new sustainable and long lasting wealth to the area.

There is still much of the rich Gold Rush History untapped, a wealth of opportunity that awaits exploitation. I will not attempt to mention them all, but will limit this proposal to one, the Twelve Mile Ditch.

The Twelve Mile Ditch (partners; TH, Parks, Yukon, Canada)

In 1906, during the industrial modernizations phase of the Klondike Gold camp, Treadgold with backing by the Guggenheims formed the Yukon Gold Company and applied to bring water from the headwaters of the Twelve Mile River near Tombstone mountain to the Klondike gold fields. The water system crosses the Tintina Trench, drops into the Klondike valley across the Klondike River from Bear Creek and then runs through Bear Creek and up and over the hills into Bonanza Creek.

Working four months per year over a three year period (1906 and 1908), 1,600-1,700 men built thirty-eight miles of open ditch, twenty miles of wooden flume and nearly thirteen miles of pipe, dropping the water a total of 1,113 feet over a distance of 70.2 miles.

Almost all the material and equipment had to be brought in from outside. With steam shovels from as far away as the Panama Canal, California Redwood for wooden stave pipe from San Francisco and lap welded pipe from Germany. The total cost for construction reaching \$4,000,000.

A power generation plant was built at the confluence of the Little Twelve Mile Creek and the Twelve Mile River and a power transmission line brought the power to the Klondike gold camp. Operations ceased in 1934 and all the equipment was virtually left where it was last used.

The Vision

Create a world class hike, along the lines of the Chilkoot Trail, which parallels the Twelve Mile Ditch. The north end of the hike would be the Tombstone campground and the south end would be Bear Creek. The industrial history of the Klondike Gold Rush to present would be interpreted at Bear Creek and the fauna & flora and TH/Tombstone history interpreted at Tombstone. Along the route Parks Canada and/or Yukon Parks would interpret the Twelve Mile Ditch story using their parks wardens that would do double duty as trail guides etc. Cabins with appropriate amenities would be built at strategically located distances providing overnight shelter for hikers.

This would be a relatively long hike at about 80 miles and would take 5-8 days. The bulk of the hike is confined to the Tintina Trench and follows the contours parallel to the ditch works so is a fairly straight forward hike. The latter part of the hike is in the Ogilvie Mountains and involves traveling up the Spotted Fawn Creek, climbing to the low ridge at the headwaters of Wolf Creek and then descending to the Dempster Highway. In order to make the hike appealing to a broad range of hiker, there will be a need to have everything done that makes it as easy as possible and this will mean having cabins located approximately every ten miles or so and having each site equipped with the basics to allow for cooking, sleeping and personal hygiene.

If the proper work doesn't go into setting up the stops appropriately, having the trail cleared and maintained and having the ditch interpreted, the chance of success are slim as the amount of people it will attract will be minimal. If on the other hand, the project is begun with the goal of creating a world class hike, the work carried out accordingly to ensure it ends up being that and a proper amount of marketing done, it could become an attraction unto itself. It is the type of hike that could bring people to Yukon not just once, but time and time again.

An additional aspect would be to capitalize on the nature of this trail to create an extreme hike event around it; the "Percy DeWolf, Iron Man of the North Extreme Hike", the "Tombstone Mountain Extreme Hike" or the "Treadgold Extreme Hike" etc.

Summation

The richness, entwinements and linkages between the first peopling of the Americas, Tr'ondek Hwech'in culture and history and the Klondike Gold Rush have huge cache and potential that can be developed to turn the Dawson area and Yukon into a world class destination comparable to the most appealing anywhere on earth, providing they are done well, in tandem and in harmony.

Any one of the above proposals could be done in isolation and on some lesser scale, but the end result would be an isolated attraction with a minimal economic impact and drawing power. In order for the proposals contained herein to succeed on a scale that has truly sustainable, long lasting and positive economic impacts to Dawson and Yukon we need to think big and then do it. We can not allow any with limited vision and drive to downsize this until it is a typical half measure.

In order for this to succeed we need to think big, work hard, never take "no" for an answer or give up because our first attempt has failed. This is doable providing the "right people are on the bus and wrong people are off the bus" and the organizations and Governments involved are not just mouthing support, but actually living their support in the form of hard and firm actions and money.